

2013 Arizona ELL Teacher of the Year – Tara Smith



Tara Smith earned a Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education from Arizona State University West, and her Master's Degree in Education-Curriculum and Instruction from Arizona State University. Mrs. Smith has been teaching for 13 years at Holiday Park Elementary School in Phoenix, Arizona. She has taught English language learners (ELLs) for all 13 years. She is highly qualified in Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education.

Numerous professional developments have contributed to Mrs. Smith's knowledge and practice in working with ELLs. Some of these include Kagan Cooperative Learning, International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), Professional Learning Communities and multiple Arizona K-12 Center technology camps held in Tucson. Mrs. Smith has played an essential role in the Move On When Reading Team and Leadership Team at Holiday Park. She is also a Discourse Mentor who supports teachers with language and discourse in the classroom setting.

Integrating technology with instruction is another strategy used to increase student academic achievement in her class. Mrs. Smith uses 1:1 iPods to increase vocabulary in her classroom. After a rigorous application process, she was awarded the 21st Century Classroom for Cartwright Elementary School District in 2010.

When asked about her ELL teaching philosophy, Tara says, "I feel that every student needs to feel important and to know that what they do matters to their family, teacher and friends. I work hard to instill a sense of pride in their accomplishments. I believe that creating a positive and caring environment in which students are recognized for their progress and achievements, paired with accountability for their own learning, is the key to creating genuine engagement. I feel that ensuring 100% engagement, 100% of the time, will lead to their academic success."

When asked about why teaching ELLs is rewarding, she says, "It's the growth I see throughout the school year. It is always amazing to me that a student, who came in with little to no English, can gain so much vocabulary and language in just a year. I love to see the joy on a child's face when they set goals for themselves and exceed those goals. It makes me feel so proud to teach such a wonderful group of students. At the end of the year, the parents are amazed to see the amount of progress their child has made in first grade."

Tara Smith is married to Garrett Smith, a police officer. They have two children: Cassandra and Jack. Tara comes from a long line of teachers in her family. Her father, Michael Swingler, teaches at Phoenix Country Day School in Paradise Valley. Her brother and sister-in-law, Jason and Monica Swingler, as well as many cousins are teachers. In her free time, she enjoys travel, bowling, swimming, bike riding and spending time with friends and family.